Disciplinary Grounding for Relational Empathy Training

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The importance of parental participation in student success is no longer the subject of much debate. Parental involvement is almost universally accepted as an important factor in student success; this includes English Language Learner's (ELL) parental involvement (Shim, 2013). There are, however, existing barriers to ELL parental participation in schools, including language and cultural differences. Shim (2013) suggested that parental involvement alone is insufficient for increasing student success, rather the more salient issue is the quality of interactions and communication between teachers and parents that can have the biggest impact on student achievement and parent satisfaction.

Disciplinary Grounding

Empathy in Intercultural Communication

Empathy plays an important role, not only in general communication competence but also as a central characteristic of competent intercultural communication (Broome, 1991). Understanding empathy in intercultural communication is informed through the lens of the phenomenological tradition which helps frame understanding of our world through direct experience of it. One comes to know something by examining it through one's perceptions of it. All we know is what we can experience (Deetz, 1973; Littlejohn & Foss, 2010). Traditionally, one can understand empathy as a general capacity to recognize, associate, and identify with another's experiences, to be able to consider the perspective of the other person (Broome, 1991; DeTurk, 2001; Walton, 2013). However, this traditional understanding of empathy may be inadequate for intercultural communication. Per Broome (1991), the traditional understanding of empathy works best with those who are most like us. We can empathize with those with whom we are familiar. Walton (2013) states that a transmissive model of empathy assumes a significant

degree of cultural congruence and as the distance grows between two groups or individuals, the

harder empathy becomes (Broome, 1991). The research indicates that intercultural empathy is

oxymoronic since the distance between cultures makes an identification, association, and

recognition –competencies needed for empathy– unattainable.

Relational Empathy in Intercultural Communication

While a traditional understanding of empathy may not be adequate for intercultural

communication, research indicates that a relational understanding of empathy can help construct

shared meaning between people in intercultural encounters (Broome, 1991; DeTurk, 2001).

Relational empathy or "third-culture building" relies not on a reproductive approach to

understanding, but rather a productive one (Broome, 1991). This production of a third culture

requires constructing meaning outside of either culture represented in the communication dyad

(Broome, 1991). "A third culture is characterized by unique values and norms that may not have

existed prior to the dyadic relationship" (Broome, 1991, p. 243). From this framework, empathic

understanding is not an individual accomplishment, but rather a shared understanding that is

developed and co-produced through our interactions with others. This approach toward empathy

places the empathy within relationships rather than individuals (DeTurk, 2001; Walton, 2013).

The work of creating relational empathy requires the willingness of both parties to create a new

sense of shared meaning that is not solely dependent on their culture.

A final aspect of intercultural empathy that the research considers is the dynamics of

power. It is important to consider this dynamic, especially concerning dominant and non-

dominant groups (DeTurk, 2001). Power dynamics between dominant and non-dominant groups

can pose significant challenges for building relational empathy. Because of the way non-

dominant groups get perceived and rebuked as being angry, emotional or violent, power

dynamics often leave the non-dominant group with an understanding that open communication is only possible with members of their group. Additionally, dominant groups are left unaware of their impact on non-dominant group members (DeTurk, 2001). "To survive, subordinate people must be attentive to the perspective of the dominant class as well as their own" (Swigonski, 1994, p. 390). Needing to be attentive to both their perspective along with the dominant group perspective places the non-dominant group at a significant disadvantage in communication events with dominant groups and highlights the necessity for relational empathy to help create a more level field where communication and understanding can take place.

The Need for Relational Empathy with ELL Parents in Schools

Given that ELLs represent the fastest growing school-age group in the nation (Kanno & Cromley, 2013) coupled with and the importance of parental involvement, provides two prominent reasons for increasing intercultural communication competence in teachers and schools (Corona et al., 2012; Ramirez, McCollough, & Diaz, 2016; Shim, 2013). Parental involvement is particularly important, and one of the primary indicator of student success, especially for ELLs is parental involvement. Parental involvement leads to improved achievement, increased school attendance, and reduced drop-out rates (Ramirez, McCollough, & Diaz, 2016; Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010). According to a number of scholars (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010; Shim, 2013), despite the clear impact on positive parent-teacher collaboration and parent involvement, parent-teacher relationships remain a source of tension.

The research (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010; Shim, 2013) identifies specific challenges for teacher-ELL parent relationships. The first challenge is one of teacher judgment over language proficiency. The myth that language proficiency is linked to intelligence allows teachers to assume that parents who do not speak English fluently lack the same intellectual

capacity as native English speakers (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010). The second is the inability to influence teacher decisions. In her research, Shim (2013) discovered that many ELL parents feel that they are being talked at and not with by teachers. Shim (2013) also found that many ELL parents feel that they are wasting their time with teachers, that the parents believed the teacher's mind was already decided and they as parents had no influence. The third challenge identified (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010; Shim, 2013), was ELL parental fear of negative repercussions for speaking up. The teachers, who are the dominant group and in a position of power, "knowingly or unknowingly, and often in the name of equality, impose their values on subordinate groups (e.g. ELL students and their parents) without risking any disruption to their own positions" (Shim, 2013, p. 23). Parents get put through normalizing grids that are constructed by the teachers. This power imbalance can lead to negative consequences if the non-dominant group resists the values of the dominant (Shim, 2013). In their research, Ramirez, McCollough, and Diaz (2016) identify the myth that due to cultural expectations, the perception can be that ELL parents are not concerned with the education of their children. These issues can also be exasperated by language brokering. Language brokering occurs when an English-speaking child or sibling serves as a translator for the parent. Language brokering can bring about feelings of shame, stress, and can create a negative experience for parents (Corona et al., 2012). Understanding power dynamics and the barriers that exist in parent-teacher relationships will help those in dominant positions discern appropriate ways to recognize their biases as well as potential solutions.

Building Empathy in ELL Interactions

The research indicates that building relational empathy in ELL parent-teacher relationships is critical to parental involvement and student success. Research suggests that there

are several places where relational empathy building can begin. Broome (1991), advocates a starting point of moving beyond a preoccupation with self. He says, "Egocentrism, which stands as a major barrier to intercultural communication, can give way to relational understandings. Arnett and Nakagawa (1983) suggest that a shift to a relational view of understanding might be analogous to the Copernican Revolution: the self, like the earth, would no longer be viewed as the center of one's world" (Broome, 1991, p. 245-246). Accordingly, people should come to see themselves situated in a relational system between people (Broome, 1991). In a school setting, educators and administrators should be taught to focus on building understanding and not simply try to determine from where the other is coming. In intercultural situations, it is often impossible to understand verbal and nonverbal expressions due to the lack of understanding of the other's cultural background. Instead, the focus should be on creating new understandings as the focus is on the communication (Broome, 1991). Creating new understanding does not mean that teachers and parents abandon their perspectives and culture, rather the priority becomes uniting their perspectives to create common meaning (Broome, 1991). As educators are in the dominant group, the impetus to begin creating relational empathy lies with the educators (Shim, 2013).

Theoretical Understanding

> To begin creating empathy in intercultural encounters
>
> requires teachers to consider what it means to really respect and understand the ELL
>
> students and parents so that differences are not merely tolerated but rather may provide
>
> the foundations for creativity through which teachers can further assist their ELL students
>
> to succeed in school (Shim, 2013, p. 24).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) helps give context for understanding intercultural communication events and whether those events are convergent or divergent

(Whaley & Samter, 2013). CAT can provide a framework for understanding the patterns of communication adjustments individuals make in intercultural communication events that can create, maintain, or reduce social distance (Whaley & Samter, 2013). Communication is influenced by more than just the features of the communication events. The socio-historical context in which those communication events are embedded affect the equality and satisfaction of those events (Whaley & Samter, 2013). "CAT suggests that individuals use communication, in part, to indicate their attitudes toward each other and, as such, is a barometer of the level of social distance between them" (Whaley & Samter, 2013, p.326). Theoretical understanding of CAT and how it influences communication events has the potential to influence or decrease satisfaction and belonging and will be helpful in understanding the need to create empathy in intercultural encounters.

Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory will also inform this project. Hofstede created a model of intercultural understanding using six dimensions of nation cultures: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint (Hoefstede, 2011). Using Hoefstede's (2001) six dimensions, one can predict potential breakdowns in intercultural communication, understanding, and satisfaction by learning and recognizing differences between cultures in dimensions and how those differences affect our underlying beliefs and assumptions. Using Hofstede's understanding of the differences between cultures, specifically in power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and collectivism will be useful in creating empathy in teachers towards limited and non-English speaking parents.

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